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Jon Ossoff

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Sen. Ossoff Secures Restored Protection of Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge

June 4, 2022

Sen. Ossoff succeeds after a year-long campaign to restore protections for Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge, Wilderness, and surrounding wetlands

Photos and B- Roll (https://www.dropbox.com/sh/t4wvbyn1idgcdyf/AAD_Crl4M3N0gCxUX8VF1fh0a?dl=0)

of Sen. Ossoff at the Okefenokee last May

Washington, D.C. – U.S. Senator Jon Ossoff has successfully secured restored protection of the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge and surrounding wetlands.

Yesterday, in response to Sen. Ossoff's year-long effort, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers granted Sen. Ossoff's request to restore key protections over the wildlife refuge, wilderness, and surrounding wetlands to protect them from proposed strip mining, which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service warned posed a dire threat to the Okefenokee.

The Okefenokee is the largest blackwater swamp in North America. It contains a National Wildlife Refuge and U.S. Wilderness Area and is one of Georgia's top sites for outdoor recreation and tourism, drawing more than 600,000 visitors per year, and one of Georgia's most beloved and environmentally significant wild places.

Since inspecting the Refuge, Wilderness, and surrounding wetlands last year, Sen. Ossoff has relentlessly pressed the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, the EPA, and the U.S. Department of the Interior to restore protection of the Okefenokee.

On Friday, the

Army Corps granted Sen. Ossoff's request (<https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2022/06/03/army-corps-engineers-reverses-wetlands-decision-okefenokee-mine/7506056001/>)

, reversing a prior decision that would have permitted strip mining around the Okefenokee. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Department of the Interior, responding to Sen. Ossoff's request for analysis of risks to the Wildlife Refuge, had warned that the strip mining risked permanent damage to the wetlands by reducing the water level, killing endangered wildlife, and causing destructive fires.

"For the last year, I've fought relentlessly to protect the Okefenokee from destruction. Today I am pleased to announce the restoration of protection for this wildlife refuge and its surrounding wetlands. The Okefenokee is a natural wonder and one of Georgia's most precious lands. I will continue fighting to protect it for future generations," **said U.S. Senator Jon Ossoff.**

"We celebrate the Biden administration's restoration of protections to nearly 400 acres of wetlands that sit at the doorstep of the Okefenokee Swamp, one of the most celebrated natural resources in the world," **said Kelly Moser, senior attorney and leader of the Clean Water Defense Initiative at the Southern Environmental Law Center.** "Senator Ossoff led this fight, and we thank him for stepping up to protect this iconic place. Failing to consult with the Muscogee (Creek) Nation epitomizes the prior administration's unlawful exclusion of these wetlands from clean water safeguards, and today's announcement restores integrity to the federal process as well as protections for this ecological treasure admired by Georgians, visitors from across the country, and people worldwide."

"Senator Ossoff first visited the Okefenokee within his first months in office to observe its impact on our local community and economy," **said Kim Bednarek, Executive Director of Okefenokee Swamp Park.** "Today, Senator Ossoff is delivering on his promise to our community by protecting and investing in the health of the Okefenokee. We are proud to have worked with the Senator and his team to save our Refuge."

Additional background on Senator Ossoff's year-long effort to protect the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge:

- Senator Ossoff has relentlessly fought to protect the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge since his first few months in office.
- Over a year ago, Sen. Ossoff [\(https://www.warnock.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/04.28.2021-Letter-FWS-Okefenokee-inquiry.pdf\)](https://www.warnock.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/04.28.2021-Letter-FWS-Okefenokee-inquiry.pdf) raising concerns with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service about the potential environmental impacts of the proposed mining development on the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge.
- In May 2021, Sen. Ossoff [visited \(https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/press-releases/photos-and-video-sen-ossoff-surveys-okefenokee-swamp-briefed-by-u-s-fish-and-wildlife-service-on-protection-of-wildlife-refuge/\)](https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/press-releases/photos-and-video-sen-ossoff-surveys-okefenokee-swamp-briefed-by-u-s-fish-and-wildlife-service-on-protection-of-wildlife-refuge/) the Okefenokee to conduct a thorough environmental review, bringing along senior U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials to survey the swamp's conservation status and biological and hydrological conditions.
- Following the review, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service officials, at his request, [\(https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2021/05/14/ossoff-visits-briefed-mining-imperiled-okefenokee-swamp-hydrology-wildlife-refuge-environmental-protection/5091047001/\)](https://www.savannahnow.com/story/news/2021/05/14/ossoff-visits-briefed-mining-imperiled-okefenokee-swamp-hydrology-wildlife-refuge-environmental-protection/5091047001/) Sen. Ossoff on their ongoing efforts to assess the environmental impacts of the mining development on the edge of the Refuge.
- Last December, Sen. Ossoff pushed the **Environmental Protection Agency (https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/21.12.20-Letter-to-EPA-re-Okefenokee.pdf)** (EPA) and the **U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/21.12.20-Letter-to-Army-Corps-re-Okefenokee.pdf)** to conduct an in-depth review of the proposed mineral mining project and assess the potential threats to the Okefenokee's environmental, cultural, and economic integrity.

- Soon after the Senator's inquiry, **the Department of the Interior affirmed** (<https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/ASFWP-signed-076308-Connor.pdf>) in a letter to USACE Sen. Ossoff's assessment that the proposed mining project "poses risks to the Okefenokee swamp ecosystem including the Okefenokee National Wildlife Refuge."
- Last week, Sen. Ossoff gathered local leaders to discuss his ongoing efforts to protect the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge—**detailing** (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vp0rer4whQ0>) his work to push the EPA, preserve this region, and reinstate federal protections to the 400 acres of wetlands around the Okefenokee.
- On Thursday at the conclusion of their review, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers briefed Senator Ossoff that **they plan to vacate their previous approved jurisdictional determination** (<https://www.ossoff.senate.gov/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Final-Rosemont-Mine-and-Twin-Pines-AJD-Memo.pdf>) given the lack of required consultation with tribal stakeholders, in this case the Muscogee (Creek) Nation.
- This action by the Army Corps, at Senator Ossoff's request, will stop the proposed mining project from proceeding, protecting the Okefenokee Wildlife Refuge from potential destruction. If any mining company wanted to proceed with a project, they would have to start over from the beginning of the jurisdictional review process under the Biden Administration's new rules.

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